MORALS AND VALUES OVERVIEW

Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone,
Dare to find a purpose true,
Dare to make it known.

In the early 1900s, many children were familiar with this song. In fact, many children were regular church attendants and part of intact families. A song that talked of purpose as well as biblical characters was common. Many children grew up knowing that they were important and that there was a reason for their lives.

However, a purpose true is not a phrase commonly used in today’s world. What does it mean? According to Webster's Dictionary, purpose is "the reason for which something exists or is done, made, etc." It is an intended or desired result. It involves determination, intention, and design.

At one time, purpose was found in such things as serving one’s country, bettering family life, helping neighbors, putting in an honest day’s work, and working together in communities. The home was a place where children learned right from wrong. The school was a place that extended the moral teachings of the home. Often, purpose came from an instilled sense of responsibility and accountability. For most of society, there was a larger sense of a higher authority.

While these elements may still exist, for many, a sense of purpose is often hidden, confused, or non-existent. There are many reasons for this confusion. The family, far more cohesive in earlier years, has experienced a series of breakdowns. Educators have decided that they should not impose views and values on children. And American society has become overtly Godless. How did this happen? How is it that young children have been left to find morality within themselves? Without a strong sense of right and wrong and the reality of consequences for actions, how does a person grow to be responsible, caring, and concerned, with a well-developed sense of self and purpose?

During the early- to mid-twentieth century, new philosophies were sown and harvested. Darwinism, relativism, and logical positivism blossomed. These, as well as many other schools of thought, have played a role in shaping (or is it "unshaping?") the character of today’s youth. Thomas Lickona, author of Educating for Character, touches on these philosophies. He states:
Darwinism said that biological life was the product of evolution; that view led people to see other things, including morality, as evolving rather than fixed or certain. Einstein’s theory of relativity, though intended to explain only the behavior of physical matter, affected thinking about moral behavior as well. When it comes to right and wrong, many people began to think, ‘It’s all relative to your point of view.’...Logical positivism introduced a fundamental distinction between ‘fact’ and ‘value.’ It held that the only real facts or truths were ones that could be scientifically demonstrated (e.g., ‘A steel ball when dropped will fall to the ground’). Moral or value statements, by contrast, were considered ‘emotive’—expressions of feeling rather than fact. Even a statement such as ‘Rape is wrong’ was judged to be personal sentiment rather than objective truth. (pp.7-8)

Over the past three decades, newer philosophies emerged. Affective education and values clarification became popular terms. The breakdown of the family became common, as did the breakdown of schools concerning the moral education of children. How children "felt" about issues of right and wrong became the focus while "indoctrination," "imposition," and "offending others" became the fear. In his book, *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*, William Kilpatrick states:

One of the chief goals [in the 60s and 70s] of human potential psychology was to help individuals ‘get in touch’ with their feelings, or to use the psychological term, with their ‘affective’ side—thus the term ‘affective education’ (p. 31).

Not only teachers and administrators bought into these philosophies, but also, parents. The idea of imposing a particular set of values on children became, ironically, the wrong thing to do. Instead, it was determined that school and family authorities needed to help children sort through their own "feelings." This way, children could decide for themselves acceptable thought and behavior. According to human potential psychology, if parents opposed the focus on feelings, they were simply in the way. Kilpatrick writes:

After all, from the viewpoint of human potential psychology, [the parents] are the largest part of the problem. Consequently, it wasn’t long before the idea of the teacher as therapist was followed by the idea of parent as therapist. The chief exponent of the idea was Thomas Gordon, a student of [Carl] Rogers, who, in a book titled Parent Effectiveness Training, urged the techniques of therapeutic listening and nonjudgmentalism on parents. The idea spread rapidly among therapists, educators, and parents as Parent
Effectiveness workshops sprang up across the country. Coulson [founding director of the once prestigious Center for Studies of the Person but who now directs the Research Council on Ethnopsychology] sums up the mood of the time this way: ‘We were to be the first generation of parents not to oppress our kids.’ (pp.38-39)

At this time, another idea loomed over the domains of education and home. Not only did children need to tune into their feelings, but they also had to "feel good." Feel good about what? About their behavior, their efforts, their image, and themselves. The term, "self-esteem," was quickly popularized, as many people were persuaded that feeling good about oneself must be one’s highest priority.

While having a solid self-esteem is important, this concept has been stretched. Adults now haphazardly praise and note even a child’s most feeble attempt. This may create a false sense of accomplishment and ability. The push for a healthy self-esteem may precede the notion that as long as a person can rationalize his or her actions and still feel good about oneself, all is well. Yet, this does not support the concepts of responsibility and accountability. As the self becomes the focal point, little regard is given for people and things outside the self. John Rosemond, a family psychologist and noted journalist, writes:

Researchers at Case Western University and the University of Virginia have concluded that when a child whose self-concept has been artificially inflated—in other words, not as a result of individual effort and bonafide success, but rather as a result of a) having been led to believe by adults that he is more capable than he actually is and b) not having been held completely accountable for misbehavior—reaches the teen years and begins having real world experiences that contradict that egoism, his self-image becomes threatened.

The two likely responses to such threat are withdrawal or a striking out at the perceived source(s) of the contradiction; in other words, depression or violence.

...Interestingly enough, rates of teen depression, drug and alcohol use (a form of withdrawal), and violence began rising sharply around the same time the "self-esteem movement" began picking up steam (The Providence Journal Bulletin, 1996, August 11).

Joining the breakdown of the family and the system of moral education in the schools was the breakdown of morals and values in society. American society
was built on biblical principles, today considered overbearing and judgmental. The church, once deemed foundational for positive character building, now often kneels to governmental influences. Religion was once a basis of life purpose for many. Today, religion is whatever one "feels." Commonly accepted is the idea that each religion is as important as the next. Also accepted is the notion that any authority (God, Buddha, or the self) is equal to any other. These ideas, combined with blatant disregard for the things of God, have facilitated the aimlessness and confusion of the younger generation. However, while it seems that these views have dominated society, many still believe that religion and the church (as universally known) can and does positively affect people’s lives, including children. In his article, "God and the Underclass," Robert Rector concludes that regular church attendance and a sense of religious belief are consequential. He writes:

Two hundred years after Wesley’s death, we still find one institution that is overwhelmingly effective in transforming behavior and in helping individuals to lift their lives out of poverty and despair, self-destruction and violence. That institution is the church. The power of religion is amply documented....Boys and girls who regularly attend church are two-thirds less likely to engage in sexual activity in their teens. Regular church attendance halves the probability that a woman will have a child out of wedlock....Children attending religious schools are two-thirds less likely to drop out than are nearly identical children who attend secular schools. Children 10 to 18 who do not attend church are a third to a half more likely to exhibit anti-social and dysfunctional behavior.

Finally, research shows that young people who attend church have a positive effect on the behavior of other youngsters in their immediate neighborhood. The positive effect of young people motivated by religious virtues is the exact counterpart to the heavily publicized negative peer pressure exerted by street gangs who suck the young into lives of aimless violence and alienation. (p. 32)

Where, then, do we go from here? How do we loosen the chains of ever new schools of thought that undermine the direct teaching of right and wrong? How do we pull our children out of this pool of confusion and aimless direction? As parents, educators, and societal participants, we have several options. First, the home. Parents need to be more aware of their children’s everyday environment, including the house in which they live, their school, and their play areas. They need to take an interest in their children’s friends. They should familiarize themselves with school policies and stand against unhealthy teachings. Basically, parents need to be more involved in the lives of their children.
As already seen, the schools play a vital role in the moral education of children. The environment created by the school is a key factor. Schools need to be environments of moral excellence. The expectations and standards set for the children should stretch them in terms of building character. (Other things, such as studying and self-esteem, will fall into place naturally if a virtuous character is well-established). Schools need to exude such universally accepted virtues and values as respect, fairness, integrity, self-discipline, and commitment. At the same time, these expectations should not only be required of the students, but also of the school’s faculty and staff. William Kilpatrick states:

The primary way to bring ethics and character back into schools is to create a positive moral environment in schools. The ethos of a school, not its course offerings, is the decisive factor in forming character. The first thing we must change is the moral climate of the schools themselves. What we seem to have forgotten in all our concern with individual development is that schools are social institutions. Their first function is to socialize. Quite frankly, many of them have forgotten how to do that. (p. 226)

Yet, parents and schools are not alone in the responsibility of bringing morality back into the lives of our children. The leaders of the American nation need to see the moral decline of our youth as top priority and concern. Although this decline has received some attention in the last few years there needs to be a greater effort in this area. The church needs to be considered once again as a vital link in retrieving the values lost. The biblical principles, on which this country was founded, need to be consistently taught and profoundly familiar. Though many would like to argue otherwise, it cannot be denied that these values and principles of right and wrong living, which provide order and purpose in society, are biblically based. The founding fathers knew this and history has continually proved that when there is a breakdown in the knowledge and utilization of these moral concepts, order becomes chaos and purpose is lost. Yet, how do we bring these concepts alive and make them fresh in the minds of our children?

One of the most powerful tools available is age-old, yet as effective today as it was then—the story. While we have become a highly technological society, providing our children with unlimited visuals through the media and computer world, they have become, virtually, non-readers with extremely short attention spans. However, when given the opportunity to listen to a story or to look at a book, many children still become intrigued and delighted. The story can make a child feel alive. Imagination is stimulated. The progression of a story can be likened to the progression of a life. There is a natural order to the story. The plot of a story is born, it grows, and it ends. It involves the reader in a meaningful way. Kilpatrick writes:
The same impulse that makes us want our books to have a plot makes us want our lives to have a plot. We need to feel that we are getting somewhere, making progress. There is something in us that is not satisfied with a merely psychological explanation of our lives. It doesn’t do justice to our conviction that we are on some kind of journey or quest, that there must be some deeper meaning to our lives than whether we feel good about ourselves. Only people who have lost their sense of adventure, mystery, and romance worry about their self-esteem. And at that point what they need is not a good therapist but a good story.

The reason why the rise of psychology has not ushered in the reign of happiness is that although it provides skills for life, psychology has never been able to say anything about the purpose of life....the psychology books have no plot. (p. 192)

To put it more simply:

We all know that stories entertain, but as suggested by the Arabian storytellers, they can also serve a more basic function. Put simply, they save lives. The conviction that our life is a meaningful story can literally keep us alive. (p. 194)

The adults of this nation have a tremendous responsibility, obligation, opportunity, and privilege to love, care for, and teach their children. Confusion will end where direction and purpose begin. It is to everyone’s detriment if the children are left to "figure it out" on their own. In the words of Theodore Roosevelt:

To educate a person in the mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society (Lickona, p.3).

The following resources were used for this discussion:

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. When you observe your own children, or the children you work with, do they seem to have a sense of right and wrong? What are some of the indications that validate your answer?

2. In your own view of the younger generation, what do you see as the most significant factors leading to moral decline? List at least three.

3. What do you desire most, for the children with whom you are in contact, in terms of a knowledge base that will lead to a life filled with direction and purpose?

4. Though several suggestions of "how to" bring these desired results about were given, list at least three of your own ideas that would contribute to the well-being of the future generation.

IMPLICATIONS

1. The moral decline of our young people should be of great concern to the adult population. Children are imitators. As role models, we need to be constantly aware of how we portray morality in our own lives.

2. With a strong sense of right and wrong, children grow in respect for self and others. Adults need to be aware that, while the feelings of the children are important, they are not decisive measures. A direct approach to teaching morality is crucial if positive results are to be seen.

3. Children need love. They also need guidance. Responsibility and accountability are not learned if they are not taught and modeled effectively.

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